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3M's site (3mmpro.com) offers some ideas on the MPro110's appeal to niche users.

And now the big box: the Sanyo PLC-XL51 Ultra Short-Throw LCD projector (photo on p. 17). Ultra Short-Throw? That means it'll toss up a big image even when placed right next to the projection surface. How close? The PLC-XL51 projects a crisp 80-inch diagonal image when placed just three inches in front of your screen or whiteboard. At 2700 lumens, it was so bright, users might choose the low-power setting and extend their lamp life.

The advantage of short-throw projection: presenters stay out of the projector beam and cast no shadows, so it's a good, though pricey, choice for use with interactive whiteboards.

The PLC-XL51 offers easy setup for a high-end projector. It will work from a variety of mounting positions and placed above or below a screen. I opted to just set it on a small cart below a whiteboard. I simply turned it on, focused it, zoomed it to the right size, and it was ready for action. Though the projector provides fine control of keystone and other elements, it was good to go, right out of its big box.

There is one caution with short-throw projectors: Since they project from an extreme angle, the image easily distorts when your projection surface isn't perfectly flat. I initially used a pull-down screen, but every disturbance from circulating air sent exaggerated waves of distortion across the projected image. I switched to a whiteboard, but found that even it wasn't perfectly flat; a small bump in it bent a portion of my image, which I could not correct. Bottom line: before you invest in a short throw projector, make sure you've got a perfectly flat surface to use it with.

The takeaway in this Tale of Two Boxes? There are more projector options to be aware of than ever.

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BY STEVE HARGADON



Unlock the Web with Open Source

The top open-source programs for educators

OK, so you've been watching the read/write revolution take place, but you feel that your students are destined to stay on the sidelines of history because these great Web 2.0 services are blocked at your school. Don't despair. Open-source solutions can help bring Web interactivity to your classroom or library while still withstanding the scrutiny of your network administrators.

Open-source software itself is a great example of how the Internet provided a platform for collaborative creativity, as programmers worked together to create these freely available, customizable applications. Open source is both the result of the new technology and an engine powering its future growth. Hard to believe that you can download and use sophisticated computer programs without licensing fees, but it's true, just look at OpenOffice, Firefox, and Linux, to name just a few open-source tools.

Despite some rather goofy names, these are serious apps that you can run on local computers inside your organization's network, creating what is called a "walled garden" for your students. It does require time and effort to get them installed and configured, but well worth it for the 2.0 revolutionary.

Audacity (audacity.sourceforge.net).

A full-featured audio-editing program that has become a standard tool for podcasters everywhere. You'll be amazed at its capabilities.

Moodle (www.moodle.org) and **Sakai** (sakaiproject.org).

These "learning management systems" provide calendar, assignment, grading, and quiz functionality and are often implemented just for these practical benefits. They can also enable discussion forums, chat, instant messaging, and wiki capability, and have been known to transform whole curricular programs and teaching practice.

Mambo (mambo-foundation.org), **Joomla** (www.joomla.org), and **Drupal** (www.drupal.org).

These are "content management systems," which means that an administrator sets up a Web site design, and contributors simply add content. These applications have been used for site building by many educational organizations because they are so easy to update. They are also great platforms for educational blogging, forum discussions, and social networking. Mambo and Joomla are relatively easy to learn and use; Drupal has more sophisticated Web 2.0 capability, but is less prepackaged.

Elgg (www.elgg.org).

Truly not for the faint of heart, but an amazingly sophisticated social networking program that brings the pedagogical benefits of social networking (and there are many) under local control.

For more information on these and other open-source programs for education, visit wiki.k12opensource.com or www.k12opentech.org.

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